

RSA 2021 Regions in Recovery – Abstract Submission

Special Session Submitted for

SS28. When the Black Swan appears: Regions and Cities Resilience in the Face of the COVID-19 Pandemic (open session)

Title: Examining the resilience of English high streets during the COVID-19 pandemic

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The ongoing impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the sustainability and resilience of town centres and high streets is being constantly (re)assessed, as more information becomes available in terms of its economic, social and behavioural effects. The unprecedented challenges of the pandemic for high street businesses, such as the periodic closure of non-essential retailing activities through 'lockdown' periods, and the need for social distancing measures when open, have significantly impacted on business resilience. The complex operating environment of our high streets and town centres - comprised of "multitudes of actors, firms and other organisations forming diverse relationships and evolving together" (Turok, 2009:14) - necessitates such measures in order to build urban service system resilience, defined in terms of "the ability of a system to anticipate, absorb, adapt to and /or recover from a disruptive event" (Baron et al, 2014).

The fuzziness and dynamism of the concept of resilience (see Meerow et al, 2016) can help explain how the post-pandemic city or town can 'bounce-back' or 'bounce-forward' (Grinberger and Felsenstein, 2014) from the current shock, building upon the technological, environmental, and socioeconomic trends that are shaping the urban environment (Couclelis, 2020). In this context, the post-pandemic high street is arguably a testbed for building adaptive capacity, based on the mix and interdependencies of existing business, the attractiveness and diversity of the locations, the systematic use of data coupled with national planning and local place management policies, and the sociocultural characteristics of local catchments (Ntounis et al, 2021; Singleton et al, 2016).

Going forward, the recovery phase of post-pandemic high streets will need to build upon multiple aspects of resilience (economic, temporal, social, environmental) (Khalili et al., 2015), which are inextricably linked to the material fabric of the high street. With the impending opening of non-essential UK retail, and with services, hospitality, commercial and recreation businesses reopening in the following weeks, one of the key aspects of assessing how vulnerable English high streets still are due to the COVID-19 crisis is to examine their level of exposure to the effects of the crisis.

Our research aims to showcase the level of vulnerability on English town centres and high streets, based on 1) the percentage of employment in each business sector and 2) the likelihood of businesses to navigate the COVID-19 crisis based on the perceived resilience of the industry they belong. Two data sets were constructed; the first data set presents the percentage of employment per industry sector for 743 centres across England (from the Centre for Towns), and the second data set calculates perceptions of high street business owners and managers regarding the resilience of their businesses from the COVID-19 pandemic. The results of the research aim to highlight the differences between sectors and their importance for particular high streets and indicate spatio-temporal considerations that can contribute to prioritization of measures to enhance resilience based on the vulnerability of sectors within locations (Ntounis et al, 2021).

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